

Regional Hegemony in a Multipolar World

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As noted in the Chief of Naval Operation's January 2016 *A Design for Maintaining Maritime Superiority*, we are witnessing a return to great power competition. Yet this return is gradual and must be viewed in terms of aspiring regional hegemony in a multipolar world rather than a reemergence of the bipolar world order that dominated the post World War II era. While Russia and China have made significant military and economic advances, they remain largely regional powers aspiring to exert a sphere of influence on their neighbors, or near abroad. India, also an emerging power with impressive economic and military growth, receives less attention but will continue to be a significant factor in shaping the international security environment. This paper will examine these rising powers and briefly examine areas of potential conflict and cooperation.

Russia has dominated the recent news cycle for a wide range of aggressive actions, ranging from interference in the US elections, to buzzing of the USS PORTER in the Black Sea, maneuvers in Ukraine, and a sustained combat role in Syria. Many have suggested these actions indicate a renewal of the Cold War, but we would be remiss if we presumed the resurgent Russian power of today followed a script from the Soviet Union's Cold War strategy. An examination of early Cold War strategic documents and guidance, such as NSC-68 or George Kennan's Long Telegram, presents stark differences in the motivations and objectives of Russian leadership, but does offer valuable lessons. Kennan's insights formed the cornerstone of US policy against the Soviet Union; he argued that Soviet security behavior was shaped by internal political, ideological, and historical factors. Yet his description of Soviet "political action is a fluid stream which moves constantly, wherever it is permitted to move, toward a given goal" applies equally to Putin's Russia of today.¹ It is imperative to first understand the motivations of present-day Russia and how it differs from the Soviet Union. Upon assuming the presidency from a beleaguered Boris Yeltsin at the turn of the millennium, Vladimir Putin made clear his intention to restore Russian power. He has methodically worked to do so, buoyed by large economic growth spurred by Russia's gas and oil. As Russia worked to modernize its military, Putin became bolder in his foreign interactions, as seen most clearly in the 2008 Georgian invasion, participation in the Syrian conflict, and the annexation of Crimea in 2014 despite heavy international condemnation.

On 18 March 2014, Putin gave a speech to both houses of parliament at the Kremlin in which he declared "Russia is an independent, active participant in international affairs; like other countries, it has its own national interests that need to be taken into account and respected."² In this speech, Putin provided insights into potential alliances, noting "we are grateful to the people of China, whose leaders have always considered the situation in Ukraine and Crimea taking into account the full historical and political context, and greatly appreciate India's reserve and objectivity."³

Despite the recognition of both China and India in his Crimea speech, it is unlikely that a Russia-China-India alliance will soon emerge. However, Russia has been working to build relations with these two countries, particularly China. The Chinese-Russian relationship has historically been a tenuous one, yet the signing of numerous gas and oil deals as well as an increase in joint naval exercises portends closer ties. In September 2016, China and Russia completed an eight-day naval

exercise in the South China Sea. This included five Russian navy ships, ninety marines, and two helicopters to pair with the ten Chinese ships, nearly twenty aircraft, and one hundred sixty marines; the drills included island seizing exercises.⁴

China has long expressed a desire for regional hegemony and is pursuing a naval strategy that would enable this. ONI noted in 2015 that China has more than 300 surface combatants, submarines, amphibious ships, and missile-armed patrol craft; it further predicts a Chinese fleet of more than 400 ships by 2020.⁵ Yet numbers alone are poor indicators of a fleet's might – one must factor weaponry, tonnage, capabilities, and operational experience. Clearly, the US has been the sole global blue water navy since the collapse of the Soviet Union, but it is equally clear that the US absolute dominance on the high seas is coming to an end.

While the Chinese naval fleet does not presently equal the US naval fleet, the PLA(N) is working to achieve greater capabilities and proficiency operating on the high seas. The construction of a base in Djibouti reflects the commitment to extended patrols. China is not the only nation reemerging as a blue water power - Russia has deployed numerous warships to the Eastern Mediterranean in support of Syrian operations and routinely deploys combatants and surveillance ships to the Western Hemisphere, as recently noted by the spy ship that transited international waters off the US eastern seaboard.

Alarmists will note the more frequent deployments of Chinese and Russian naval vessels, but one must be careful to appropriately assess both their capability and proficiency. The US will continue to dominate the high seas in both areas into the near future. Current US defense spending levels are equivalent to the next seven countries combined – without factoring the Trump Administration's newly announced proposed increase of \$54B. In 2015, China spent just over \$214B on defense, compared to Russia's \$91B and India's \$51B.⁶ While defense spending is notoriously challenging to account for, there is little doubt that the US massively outspends these aspiring powers

While confrontation must never be discounted, the US must adopt a strategy of both cooperation and deterrence. Graham Allison's famous examination of sixteen cases of rising powers rivaling a ruling power in the last five hundred years noted that war resulted in all but four of the cases.⁷ Though 'Thucydides Trap' portends that war may be more probable than peace, it is not inevitable, particularly in modern times. It is thus imperative to prepare for war – but also to seek increased cooperation to build trust and avoid miscalculations due to misunderstandings.

There are numerous areas that could be more fully explored for cooperation between one or more rising powers. The Arctic represents an area of significant interest to Russia, the US, and even China given its potential economic value. The Arctic Council has provided a useful forum for increased dialogue and cooperation, but the US Navy and Coast Guard should also seek to include Russia and China in multilateral Arctic operations. Search and Rescue and crisis response provide low threat areas of cooperation that would also develop critical skills for any future emergency – which becomes increasingly likely as the traffic in the region climbs.

Multilateral drills – particularly ones focused on humanitarian operations – present other opportunities for engagement. Russia and China were invited to participate in RIMPAC in 2012 and 2014, respectively. India and China participated in RIMPAC 2016, though Russia had not been invited and instead dispatched a spy ship to trail the exercises. Inviting all three countries to RIMPAC 2018 would offer an opportunity to build positive relations and improve cooperation.

Cooperation is imperative on the high seas and multilateral agreements like the 2014 Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES), signed by twenty-one Pacific nations at the Western Pacific Naval Symposium, serve an important purpose to open communications and establish

standards of conduct. CUES was designed to prevent inadvertent escalation of tensions at sea, reminiscent of the 1972 US-USSR Agreement on the Prevention of Incidents On and Over the High Seas (INCSEA). While INCSEA responsibilities were assumed by the Russian Federation, an increase in recent incidents between US and Russian forces at sea indicate that a revision of the agreement may be necessary. It should not be limited to just the US and Russia, but consideration should be given to inviting other countries to participate in drafting a new, relevant agreement.

While there are many additional opportunities for engagement, these represent areas that would present low-risk opportunities to improve relations while also ensuring a more effective response for humanitarian and crisis response in the future. Cooperation with Russia, China, and India can yield positive relations and present an opportunity to improve communications, reducing the risk of inadvertent escalations due to misunderstandings. Yet we must be mindful of Allison's findings and continue with a realistic naval strategy to ensure supremacy if challenged.

¹ George Kennan. "The Sources of Soviet Conduct." *Foreign Affairs*. 1946.

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/1947-07-01/sources-soviet-conduct>

² BBC. "Crimea Crisis: Russian President Putin's speech annotated." 19 March 2014. *BBC News*.

<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26652058>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Sam LaGrone. "China, Russia Kick Off Joint South China Sea Exercise; Includes 'Island Seizing' Drill." 12 September 2016. *USNI News*. <https://news.usni.org/2016/09/12/china-russia-start-joint-south-china-sea-naval-exercise-includes-island-seizing-drill>

⁵ Ronald O'Rourke. "China Naval Modernization: Implications for US Navy Capabilities – Background and Issues for Congress." *Congressional Research Service*. 17 June 2016. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33153.pdf> p. 49-50.

⁶ SIPRI. "Military Expenditure by country, in constant USD, 2006-2015." *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*. <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/Milex-constant-USD.pdf>

⁷ Graham Allison. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/09/united-states-china-war-thucydides-trap/406756/>